

We've Gotta Have It

Black filmmakers seize the moment.

Edited by GENE SEYMOUR

"Never has there been a better time to be an African-American filmmaker," Spike Lee wrote in a May 1999 piece for the *New York Times*. He's not wrong, of course, especially when what's been happening in the past few years is compared with fifty, forty or even twenty years ago; when the box-office fizzle of the 1978 musical *The Wiz* was regarded by industry pundits as the end of the "blaxploitation" era.

The more recent explosion in black film, which Lee himself helped detonate with the unexpected triumphs of *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) and *Do the Right Thing* (1989), has brought an unprecedented diversity of African-American sensibilities and voices to both mainstream and independent film. Even a limited recitation of 1990s black films—from such art-house legends as Charles Burnett's *To Sleep With Anger* (1990), Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) and Carl Franklin's *One False Move* (1991), to such pop phenomena as John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), F. Gary Gray's *Friday* (1995) and Forest Whitaker's *Waiting to Exhale* (1995)—is enough to suggest the breadth of African-American movie-makers' work at the millennial cusp.

Progress? Yes, if your idea of progress is being allowed to make the same proportionate amount of art and schlock as mainstream Hollywood. For every *To Sleep With Anger* or *Daughters of the Dust*, there are at least a half-dozen *Booty Calls* or *Next Fridays* or any manner of cinematic junk food custom-designed for the lowest common denominator. While comedies with African-American leads are swiftly packaged and delivered to multiplexes, black-themed dramas are given a narrow window for mainstream distribution at those rare times when they're "green-lit" by studios. Moreover, there remains a nagging insularity within Hollywood's power structure that prevents true multiculturalism on- and offscreen.

Then again, it wasn't so long ago that Hollywood couldn't imagine any financial prospects for "product" aimed at black audiences. Now, not even the dimmest bulb in the big-studio boardroom can ignore or dismiss black people's power to generate dollars by the bushel. Last summer, films made by, for and with African-Americans were pulling in some of the biggest box-office receipts of that all-important season. While highly touted star vehicles with Mel Gibson (*The Patriot*) and Jim Carrey (*Me, Myself and Irene*) were underperforming at the ticket counters, Keenen Ivory Wayans's relatively modest spoof, *Scary Movie*, collected more than \$230 million worldwide. The news was even good for lower-budget productions such as Gina Prince-

Bythewood's *Love and Basketball*, made for \$13 million, which earned \$28 million.

At this fertile moment for black film, I talked with five African-American filmmakers who have shown the ability to walk the tightrope between commercial and noncommercial projects: Melvin Van Peebles, the unreconstructed maverick who single-handedly altered the American movie landscape with his *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971); Stacy Spikes, former marketing executive with Miramax and October Films, who founded New York's annual Urban World Festival for minority films and is now CEO of Urbanworld Group, an independent film distributor; Kasi Lemmons, an actor turned director who's followed up her 1997 cult success, *Eve's Bayou*, with another Gothic mystery, *The Caveman's Valentine*, released in March in selected cities; Reginald Hudlin, director of *House Party* (1990) and *The Great White Hype* (1996); and John Ridley, novelist (*Love Is a Racket*), screenwriter (*U Turn*, *Three Kings*) and co-producer of the NBC series *Third Watch*. Following is an edited transcript of the interviews.

Q: Are you optimistic? Do you think things are good and getting better for black film?

Stacy Spikes: It's an incredible time! Look at the last fifty years we've been in the movies and how the only time we'd be seen on a screen is when we carry a tray and say, "Yassa, boss!" Or we were the comic relief. Now, you can take *Rush Hour* [a recent action comedy with Jackie Chan and Chris Tucker] with no white male leads and make \$141 million.

Reginald Hudlin: Well, there's no doubt about it. The number of black directors working, the variety of films we are able to produce, the number of black stars to work with and even the number of white stars who are excited about working with black directors. I mean, there's no time that's remotely close.

Right now...well, once you had this thing where black people had to, more or less, keep our place. Now, our place in the business of entertainment is that black "product" has the greatest return on the dollar. Meaning that they invest the least amount of money and it makes the most. Often, the most in relation to cost, especially when you look at what *Scary Movie* did. Which changes the economic formula studios put together to make a movie.

Q: How so?

Hudlin: Some studios are, like, "We only want home-run movies. The kind that get made for \$80 million and make, say, \$200 million." Then there are studios that are satisfied with doubles and

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singles. These guys say, "Well, let's try something out with Eddie Griffin and see if it turns out for him the way it turned out for Martin Lawrence." Or Chris Rock, who's alone on the poster for *Down to Earth* with no white co-stars. It makes \$20 million its first weekend. And this happens so regularly now that it's taken for granted compared with fifteen, twenty years ago.

Q: What about other genres, besides comedies? It often seems when black movies venture into drama or even quirkier stories—like yours, Kasi—they're made within very narrow parameters.

Kasi Lemmons: That's right. I mean...in terms of how much money you get to make a certain film, there is a formula, OK? It was broken down for me once by someone I heard speak one year at the Summit...

Q: What is this "Summit"?

Hudlin: Every fall, the Black Filmmaker Foundation gathers some of the top filmmakers, executives in film and television—blacks, Latins, Asians, maybe about 100

people—and they come together and talk for three days. And it gets very intense because there's no other forum for everyone to get together in one room close to, but away from, Hollywood. And everyone can kind of click and bond.

Lemmons: It's a very charged atmosphere, like a Renaissance weekend for minority filmmakers. I haven't missed it since they started. You come away feeling inspired.

Q: Getting back to the issue of financing, Kasi, tell me how you got *Caveman's Valentine* going.

Lemmons: Well, Samuel L. Jackson and Jersey Films were already attached to the project when I came on. Jersey has a track record of putting together packages of material that's difficult to sell. And because Sam and I worked together on *Eve's Bayou*—and in fact he made it possible for me to make that movie in the first place—it became easier to package it.

Q: But what about selling it to financiers? I mean, we're talking about a movie whose hero is a psychotic African-American derelict who rails against unseen forces and has a sexual encounter with a white woman. Not the sort of story that attracts instant financing.

Lemmons: Well, my feeling is you never know why somebody is passing on the material, OK? At one point, we were in business with a company that we really seriously thought was going to make the movie, and then there was a changeover of personnel and they balked at the material. Which is particularly distressing.

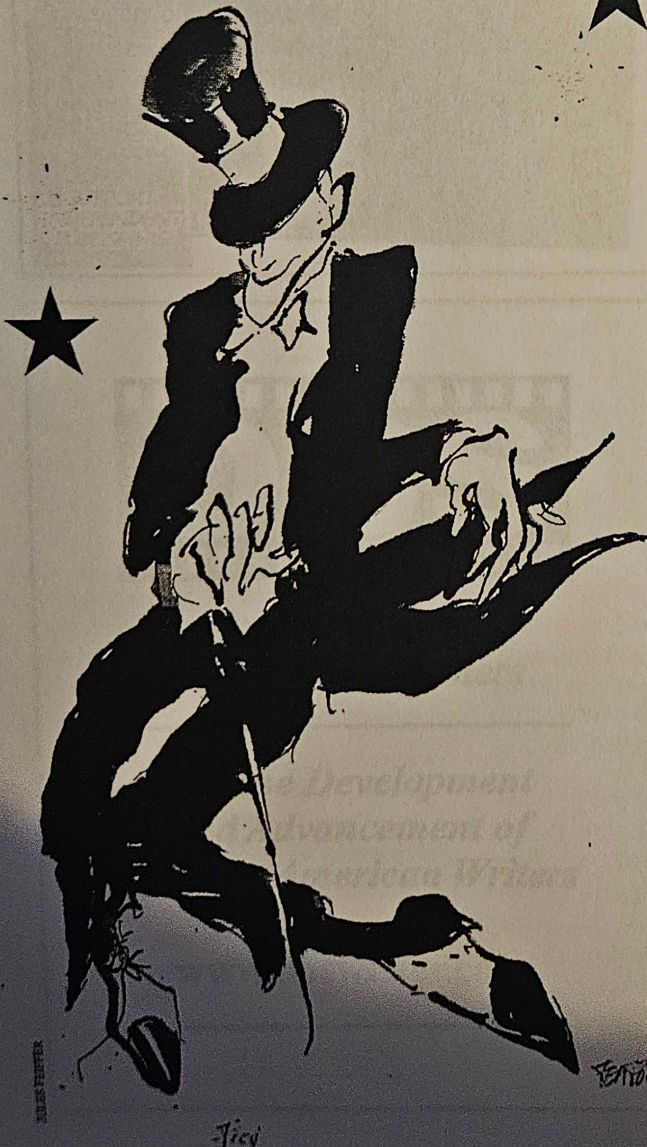
But for the most part, people either love it or hate it, and they tell you without telling you why. Even though there are a million things they can hide behind. Like, say, African-American actors don't "sell foreign" or that this is a hero who'll rub people the wrong way or, like, who wants to see a movie about a schizophrenic homeless black man, you know? I never heard that the interracial sex rubbed people the wrong way, though I'm sure it did. It's OK, though. We did find someone to work with for whom none of these issues seemed to matter at all.

Q: Mr. Van Peebles, did you encounter resistance early on, when you were trying to make *Sweetback*?

Melvin Van Peebles: I didn't have to worry about anyone else because I did it all myself. I tried the studio thing. Had a three-picture deal with Columbia. But when it came to something like [*Sweetback*], they said, "How could I be doin' somethin' like this and dahdahdah..." Now, people are oohing and aahing about what I did. But back then, I was on my own. Did my own distribution, publicity...

And remember when the movie came out and played in one city and made all this money? People said, "Oh, that was a fluke!" Took it to the next city. Said, "Oh, that's another fluke!" Eight, ten, eleven cities, they were still saying that. It's like Jack Johnson. Couldn't, wouldn't give him an opportunity to fight for the heavyweight championship. No one thought twice about it because we know a black person could never beat a white person.

And it wasn't just dangerous on the black level. Forget the political message. What was dangerous was, here is a guy who comes along with two pieces of Scotch tape, makes himself a



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huge killing. I mean yes, I'm the godfather of modern black cinema. But I'm also the godfather of *Blair Witch Project* and all that implies, hmm?

Q: So is it better for you now?

Van Peebles: If you mean...well, I can't really answer that. I mean, if somebody gets in my way, I choose to go around them. By them, I mean whoever doesn't want me to tell a story I want to tell. Better? Easier? Look, man, money can be found on the level to make films, and there are more of them being made because technology has given us a hand here.

Q: You used digital cameras on your newest, *A Belly Full*?

Van Peebles: That's right, that's right. But there's a whole other thing past the making of it. You have to figure out how to get it out on your own. I took *Belly Full* to festivals to do my test marketing on somebody else's dime. After that, you just have to find the help you need to distribute it. There are a lot of righteous brothers and sisters and other folk who want to do the right thing and help. But of course, they don't want to lose what could amount to a very substantial amount of money either. So they'll come to me because of my name and what it represents. But who knows what'll happen?

Lemmons: Could we talk about the seventies for a second?

Because I think there were a lot of really fabulous movies made in those years, like *Sweet Sweetback*, that were really, really powerful and would be extremely difficult to make now. I'm thinking of movies that hardly get mentioned anymore, like *Claudine* and *Putney Swope*. It was just a really interesting time for movies. And I feel that was one of those times when anything was possible, a new time was dawning, and it didn't really fulfill its promise. And I'm not sure exactly why, but there were only a handful of African-American directors, like Melvin Van Peebles and Gordon Parks. And now there are so many more.

Q: Are the opportunities really greater today? I tend to think that, like everything else in movies, it's a good news/bad news situation.

John Ridley: Well, the good news is that there is a lot of work for black filmmakers. The bad news is there's a lot of work for very few black filmmakers. It's a very narrow market. For everybody: black, white, what have you. But it's certainly narrower if you're black and even narrower if you're Asian or Hispanic.

Q: Statistics show drastic underrepresentation of minorities in the industry. The Writers Guild of America reports that in 1997, just under 5 percent of writers working on feature films were minorities. There was a rise in minority roles in 1999, with black roles going up from 13.4 percent to 14.1 percent. Still...
Spikes: I remember something [president of Time Warner] Dick Parsons said once: A company that does not look like its target audience will ultimately miss its mark. I liked that. He was saying that if you want black business and you don't hire black people in your company, what chances are you going to have? How do you feed that audience if you don't feel that audience's needs in your own arteries?

Ridley: The problem with the craft unions, the crews and the lack of minorities? That's a huge, huge problem. That's even larger than the problems above the line.

Q: Talk about that a little.

Ridley: I mean, Will Smith and Eddie Murphy are going to bring in millions and millions of dollars. So there's going to be an incentive to work with those guys. And they're proven commodities, coming from television, *Saturday Night Live* or what have you. For people in the trade unions, what's the difference if you hire a black guy or a white guy? And I don't think a lot of people in the trade unions are racist at all. But the reality, as with most jobs, is that you're going to hire people you've worked with before, people you feel comfortable with. If you're a white guy, who do you feel comfortable with? A white guy. I've worked with crews that are mixed and everybody—literally everybody, black, white, Asian—gets along. But it makes a difference when the person on the top is saying, "Hey, make sure we mix it up a little bit."

Q: What about the attitudes in the executive suites, Stacy? How easy is it for a person of color to make something happen with a studio at that level?

Spikes: Let me put it this way. For a long time, when we were on the outside looking in, we were always saying, "Hey, could you give us a little money so we could play this game, too?" Now, [black people] are upwardly mobile with a little more expendable income and now, maybe, Daddy is willing to write us a little \$100,000 check to let little Jimmy go do this crazy thing which was once only the privilege of white kids.

Q: The way you frame that metaphor suggests the extent to which the black audience and the black filmmakers are, to Hollywood, children to be indulged instead of engaged. Is that mode of thinking still in play?

Spikes: Absolutely. How many heads of studios do you know who are black? Until Berry Gordy, how many do you think would be put in charge of a whole record company? None. Until you flip the industry or make money outside the system, like Gordy did, until that happens in film, we won't be in the position to command respect.

Q: Is "respect" hard to come by? Even after all you've accomplished?

Spikes: I'll never forget when I was a little kid, my dad would always say, "If you make a C, you're not going to get the job. If you make an A, when the white kid makes a C, now you're even."

You see what I mean? If a white producer and a black producer walk into the same offices at the same time, they're not equal. Same script, same movie. One is going to get it made. The

other is not. Well, where's the money going? Why won't it go to the black producer? Is there some reason that goes, like, we can't handle money or we're not responsible? I look at some of the issues I've dealt with in setting up this distribution company. I have to audition every time I'm up to bat. I tell them how I was vice president of marketing at Miramax. I've run October Films' marketing. I've marketed campaigns with \$100 million war chests. And I've set up, from scratch, a film festival that's half the size of Sundance and still, still, I have to get beyond [white executives'] apprehensions. It's down to "Gee, I dunno..." or "I'm not sure..."

Q: And yet, you still believe this is the best of times for black film?

Spikes: Oh, yeah! It's changing, definitely changing. There are more black independent films being made than ever before. More black stories being told. In the past five years at the Urban World festival, we've premiered one or two movies that opened number one or number two at the box office. That's how it gets done, showing them from the outside that you can make money.

Q: Some say that the best way for black filmmakers to connect with audiences is to build their own infrastructure of production, distribution and marketing, while others say it's best to work from within the system. What do you think?

Van Peebles: I understand that there are more than one or two ways to skin a cat, and if you can do that in or out, great, no problem! I mean, after *Sweetback*, suddenly there was this need to hire

people to tell the stories to meet the demand I created. And the people they hired were black. They learned the craft, they went on to make significant contributions to the industry.

And that's fine, too.

Lemmons: Building a separate infrastructure? I mean, I think that's a good idea and it's something I've thought about for a

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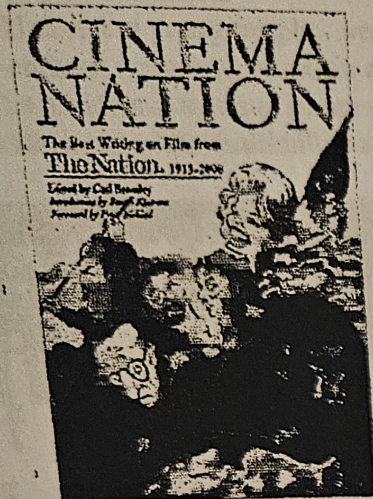
Q: What could be a more perfect picture of the human condition than that of two men pushing a piano across a rope bridge between two alps?

A: The same thing with an angry gorilla coming in the opposite direction. It's in "Swiss Miss" of 1938.

ROBERT GROSSMAN

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long time. I don't necessarily think it's the only way, and I'm not sure it's the easiest way.

Q: OK, why?

Lemmons: I don't know... I mean, it's very hard when you're talking the amount of money you need for distribution. That's a lot of money. Whereas, I think product creates demand, to a certain extent, the more that we can get a variety of product out there and educate the audience by showing them a lot of different things. Not just comedies, but family dramas. Not just family dramas, but science fiction and so on.... The more types of product you have out there, the more you create the demand for it. And I think that once the demand is established, we can carry out the rest through the system. Because all anyone really wants is to make money. You can speculate about some mastermind, institutional racism, but I don't think so. I think it's probably all about commerce. And I think we can change the system just by making films.

Q: So you think it's a process that can begin outside the system and gradually expand perceptions of African-Americans from within the studio system itself?

Lemmons: I think so, but I think the process you're talking about is more like an elaborate conversation between the audience and the filmmaker, between the supply and demand. I mean, audiences can be difficult, too. They have to be nurtured and brought around and made to accept a variety of product, which right now they are not. We're conditioned to accept a variety of white product, and we're not really conditioned to accept a variety of African-American product.

Or "crossover" product that is neither here nor there. Or is both here and there...

Q: I want to stay with this a moment. You mention "crossover." I was thinking of Erin Brockovich, and one of the things that at once bewilders and infuriates me is that there are many black women I can think of who have had adventures similar to Erin Brockovich, and they're every bit as funny, scary, absorbing and triumphant. But if such a movie were made it would be perceived as a "niche product," exclusively for black people. Whites wouldn't be in the target audience.

Lemmons: Yeah, it bugs me too. And it's very hard to get an audience, even like some of the young really liberal white kids that I know. It's very hard to get them to see an African-American movie even when I tell them they'll love it. Like *The Best Man*. I tell them, "It's right up your alley. I hear you guys talking about this stuff all the time. You'll think it's funny." And they never go.

Q: They don't. Why? Is it racism?

Lemmons: Who knows? It may be a feeling that they really—I mean, there is a reality. And the reality is that white people don't really have to deal in a black world, whereas all black people have to deal in a white world. And that's one of the reasons we're good with [writing] those white voices, because we're subjected to them a million times a day.

But I don't know why they won't go see black films. It's almost as if it's in a marginal tribal dialect that they don't understand.

Spikes: Maybe it's not happening for older folks. But the children...they spend billions a year on hip-hop. Interracial love stories like *Save the Last Dance* open up at number one and sit there for two or three weeks. You look at movies like *Romeo*

Must Die, where you have an Asian hero and an African-American woman lead. Huge! The crossover potential isn't even a potential with these kids. It's there! The 50-year-olds? Don't even bother with them.

Ridley: Not to sound like an old man, but young people...yeah, they're affected by the cross-cultural influence in music and hip-hop and things like that. The problem is that movies are still dominated by twenty-five middle-aged white multimillionaires

who are out of touch. And not just with black people, but with everything.

Look at what happened with *Pay It Forward*. It was adapted from a novel in which the lead male character was African-American, and yet they cast a white actor [Kevin Spacey] to play the role. You're telling me there wasn't a black actor around who could play that part? It certainly wouldn't have made less money with a black actor. So, you can say, it will get better, it will get better. But how much more bankable do you have to be as a black actor or actress? How many more positive responses do you have to have from moviegoers in general, white and black, before it really changes? I don't know.

Long Live Indie Film

Reports of its demise have been exaggerated.

GEOFFREY GILMORE

Independent film is at a crossroads. After a decade of outstanding growth, the emergence of a new generation of filmmakers and the maturation of an older one, the effective transformation of an industry and of an art form, the question of what independent film actually is and where it's headed is bound to stir discussion and debate. After eleven years of directing the Sundance Film Festival, perhaps I can offer perspective from a post that has allowed me a special understanding of the trends and developments that have characterized the growth of the independent film arena.

Throughout the past ten years, the remarkable success of independent film has been accompanied by a constant drumbeat thumping out the message that independent film is dead, or has become synonymous with studio output. Simply put, this isn't true. There are reasons one might believe this to be the case, but an examination of the broader independent arena leads, I think, to a different conclusion.

That independent film, generally speaking, has ambitions to be commercially successful is certainly true. But that does not mean it is now no more than a creature of the market, like most studio productions. Indeed, independent film at its best is still aggressively, passionately, creatively driven and original. Just look at the films. Which of this year's Independent Spirit Award nominees—*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*; *Requiem for a Dream*; *Before Night Falls*; *You Can Count on Me*; or *Chuck & Buck*—could have been made as a major studio film? None. Perhaps more significant, do any of these works suggest an arena that is aesthetically indistinguishable from even high-quality studio productions like *Gladiator*, *Cast Away* or, for that matter, *Erin Brockovich*? To anyone familiar with these works the answer is, I think, the same. None of the Independent Spirit nominees are derivative of commercial product.

Geoffrey Gilmore, co-director of the Sundance Film Festival, has been director of film selection and programming for Sundance since 1990.

None are formulaic or mainstream in their appeal.

Low-budget works like *George Washington*, *Everything Put Together*, *Our Song* or *Urbania*, all Spirit Award nominees, have even less resemblance to mainstream studio filmmaking. Each of these films was produced for less than \$500,000. They deal with subjects that include homophobia, AIDS, poverty and issues of social class, race and marginality. They focus on African-American, Latina and gay protagonists. Analysts of the doom-and-gloom persuasion would undoubtedly make the point that these films all had or will have a limited theatrical release, that the bigger, more commercial independent films have been crowding out the archetypal low-budget, "truly" independent films. It's true that what I call "indie-studio" works are released on hundreds, even thousands of screens, thus relegating smaller films to just a few theaters. But that was always true. Pessimists would also say that the competitiveness in the theatrical marketplace, the number of releases fighting for exhibition, forces most low-budget films to go directly to video—but actually there are twice as many independent distribution companies now as there were five years ago, which makes it more likely that a greater number of films will find theatrical release, however brief.

In fact, there was never a golden age for independent films. The relative success of low-budget works like *Clerks*, *The Brothers McMullen* or *El Mariachi* says more about their freshness and distinctiveness as feature releases than it does about an ideal past when independent film was more fully appreciated. At the same time, the changing marketplace and evolving agendas of major independent distributors have a much greater impact on the availability of low-budget work than whether independent filmmaking has gone "mainstream." Most major independent companies used to pride themselves on finding audiences for difficult-to-market films—that is, distinctive, interesting independent work. Now, having seen how much money can be